

Turkic Religion

The Orkhun Inscriptions tell that *Gök Tengri* is the blue sky, and he is the supreme celestial god of the Turks. *Yağız Yir* (dark earth) represents fertility. The Turks had *Umay* as the mother goddess together with *Iduk Yir-Sub* (Earth-Water) and *Erlık*.

Gök Tengri is sacred and the source of power, which transfers power to the Turk Kaghan on earth. The legitimacy of the ruler in Turkic societies stem from *Tengri*'s divine power. *Tengri* gives "kut" (power, fortune, fertility, sacred/spiritual power, sovereignty and so on) to the ruler, and when necessary He takes "kut" back. *Kök* (*Gök*) *Tengri* (*Tanrı*) was Blue Sky in original, but most probably following the conversion of the Uyghurs into Judaism, *Tengri* (sky) lost its *Gök* (blue) characteristics, and became abstracted and transcendental power.

In the pantheon of Turks' gods takes also place *Umay* as the protector of children until their adolescence. Mother *Umay* provides "kut" as well as the goddess of fertility. The Turks also worshipped the dark earth, *Yağız Yir* that they considered to have provided fertility as sacred land, symbolized with a steep mountain, probably in *Ötüken*. *Iduk Yer Sub* lost its functions in the 8th century and its powers were overtaken by such free lands as plains, pastures, steppes, marshes as granted to the common use of the people. *Iduks* became the souls of waters, forests, mountains, and horses, devoted to *Tengri* as no man's possession.

Tengri has all the power, and provides order to this-worldly life to the people. *Öd Tengri*, the god of time and space is the owner of the natural order of universe. *Erlık* is the god of the hell (*Tamu*) in the underground, and serves to *Öd Tengri*.

The Kaghan is believed to have been empowered by the Celestial God, *Tengri*, and represents his power on earth. The following information from the *Kültigin* Inscriptions provides the power and sacredness of the kaghan: *Tengri teg tengride bolmış türük Bilge kağan* (Like God, derived from God, Türk Bilge kağan); *Tengri yarluqaduqın için özüm kutum bar için kağan olurtum* (For God ordered, for I myself had godly power, I became kaghan). The Kaghan, mandated from *Gök Tengri*, is the ultimate power and the provider of *törü* (law). Kaghan's wife, Khatun, is also believed to be the emanation of Mother-Goddess, *Umay Khatun*. *Tengri* has all the power; he is the God of the armies over everything, who determines victory in wars. He is also called as *Gök-Tengri*, meaning the blue sky. *Yer-Su* (Earth-Water) is also another divine power in the Turkish belief, working with *Tengri*. *Ötüken*, the fatherland between the Orkhun and Selenga rivers is the sacred place, where the Kaghan organizes sacrifice rituals to the divinities. *Ötüken* is, therefore, home of funerary inscriptions for *Bilge*, *Kültigin* and *Tonyukuk*.

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Shamanism

The Turkic documents, including the 8th century stone inscriptions do not tell much about Shamanism among the Turks. However, Kaghan is attributed to Shaman characteristics depending on his duty of sacrifice and rituals in certain days in the sacred cave in Ötüken. Some sources inform that Shamanism was spread among all North Asian peoples of the Ural-Altaic societies, including Tungusic, Mongolian and Turkic communities, and *kam*, the title of the man of religion, is generally translated as Shaman. Shamanism is based on a belief of a well-built connection between human-beings and their deceased ancestors. Atavism requires a strong tie to the legacy of the great ancestors; therefore it necessitates a constant respect and admiration to the ancestors. Only certain people from certain families (ogush) can have and know *kam* powers, and carry on the rituals. *Kam* takes his power and knowledge required for Shamanhood from his grand fathers, he has the power of using the *kam* drum, sing the stories, make the rituals, and call upon the souls of the ancestors. He sacrifices the animals, generally a horse, to ascend his own spirit to the gods. *Kam*, as the intermediary between man and souls, cleans up the earth from the souls of the dead, manages to send requests from humans to the ancestors, acts as magician, heals as a physician and tells divine fortunes.

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Judaism

The Khazar Khanate has a special locus in the history of religion in the Turkic world, since they were converted to Judaism when they established their state in the Caspian steppes after the collapse of the Turkish Empire in the middle of the 8th century. The Khazar Khanate was established by the Türks in the Black Sea, Caspian and Volga steppes. That the Khazar khanate was neighboring Byzantium, Sasanid Iran and the Arab Caliphate is most probably one of the reasons that Kaghan and elites were converted Judaism in the beginning of the 9th century. The Khazar wars with the neighboring states and the relations with sedentary societies of the Mediterranean provided by a location on the trade routes were among the major reasons for the Khazars to profess Judaism. Also Judaism provided a room for the Kaghan to centralize and strengthen his authority around this monotheistic religion. Kahazaria was multi-religious; while the core elites were Judaic, other religions, including Gök Tengri belief continued to find adherents. The usage of the Hebrew alphabet together with the Runic one is one of the consequences of multi-culturalism in Khazaria. The modern Karaite community in Crimea and in South Poland is the last descendants of Khazar Judaic tradition, though there are theological differences between the Rabbanic belief that the Khazar Khanate made official religion and the Crimean Karay community's practices.

Manichaeism

The Turks established close political and military contacts with many other societies of Central Asia as well as they got into contact with their cultures, traditions and religions. Among the religious beliefs that spread into Central Asia before the rise of Islam, Manichaeism was the first to take the Turks under its effects as a world religion. Mani, a 3rd century Parthian teacher, established his tradition on the duality of good and bad, much possibly borrowed from Zoroastrianism, and on an amalgamation of Christian faith and Gnostic elements, spread his teaching to Central Asia. The Uyghur Kaghan, Bögü, was the leader of the Uyghur rule in the Eastern Turkistan (Xinjiang) following the collapse of the Turkish Empire in 744. The Uyghurs occupied the Chinese capital in 762 and the Kaghan and his close circles were converted to Manichaeism towards the end of the 8th century through the Sogdian missionaries. Manichaeism extended its teachings to the people as the Uyghur Khanate expanded its borders to the West of Asia, including Turkistan. The Uyghurs moved to the Tien Shan region in the 9th century, and their religion also continued to find followers among the urban and merchant populations in the region.

Buddhism

The cities of the Silk Road were home for many religions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Taoism. Taspar Kaghan (572-581) had adopted Buddhism, most probably out of the Empire's location between Chinese and Iranian strongholds. He built temples, translated texts, and became the agent of the expansion of Buddhism to northern peoples. The Uyghur came across with Buddhism when they established the Western Uyghur Khanate along the Persian border. They came into contact with the Buddhist texts first with Tokharian sources, then with Chinese translations, and in the 10th century, the Uyghurs became Buddhist, and served the other Central Asian civilizations as the Buddhist translators, men of religion, and scholars. The Uyghur Buddhist elements also took place in the 13th century Mongolian rule, and the Uyghurs were the carriers of Buddhism from Central Asia to the West. Starting with the expansion of Islam by the Arab raids into the region from the 8th to the 10th centuries, Buddhism lost significance among the population. As Islam expanded towards the East, the Buddhist temples of Eastern Turkistan were destroyed, monasteries damaged and the Uyghurs were forced to convert to Islam. However, the remnants of Buddhist art and culture reached to present with the sand-stone monasteries and cave temples in Xinjiang region.

Nestorian Christianity

Christianity has an earlier history of expansion in Central Asia after the collapse of the Sasanid Empire in the 6th century. Persian and Syriac merchants and missionaries were the intermediaries between Christianity and Central Asians, the Uyghurs, Sogdians, and the Mongolians at most along the Silk Road until the 10th century. Nestorian Christianity had upper hand over other religions in the Mongolian and Uyghur populations in the 13th century. The traces of Christianity can be followed through paper documents and tombstones in an area from present Kirghizstan to Inner Mongolia. The documents were in Syriac, Sogdian and Uyghur scripts, mostly adapted from ancient Aramaic.

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Islam

The first contacts of the Turks with Islam were during the Arab raids into Central Asia in the first half of the 8th century. This happened when the Umayyad-Abbasid conflict over the question of the Caliphate (the leadership of the Islamic state) was solved in favor of the Abbasids. Having the power of the Islamic world in Baghdad, the Abbasids had the Turks as slave soldiers, and began converting and assimilating the Turks into Islam. With the Turks' entrance to Islam, both Islam and the Turks gained a new power and identity. The Turks adopted their ancient gods (Tengri, Yer-Su, Tamu) to Islam and conversion became relatively more acceptable to them. Nevertheless, the conversion of the Turkic masses to Islam lasted from the 9th to well into the 14th century due mainly to the nomadic life of the Turks. Islam too gained a new sword with the Turks to deliver the faith to the Balkans and to Europe. The formation of a complex structure of Islamic law, education, philosophy and practices was also built by the Iranian ulema (scholars) during the same centuries. Islamic institutions, leadership, education and legal order developed on the Persian and Arab teachings and practices during the Seljukid period, and Islam, fully organized as the Sunni mode in the 14th century, became the official religion of the Ottoman Empire. It was the Ottoman Empire that created an Islamic high culture, not only in arts and architecture, but also in Turkish Islamic language, literature and philosophy in the Balkans, and Tamerlane and his successors that produced a high Islamic culture in Central Asia and India.

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Sufism

While Sunni Islam was consolidated in the 12th century, there emerged a combination of Islam and Turkic traditions in Turkistan (also in Iran and North Africa) by the teachings and religious practices of a series of mystic thinkers who search for the real meaning of Islam in religious text, human mind and divine inspiration. This tradition produced in Turkistan many Sufis and their *tariqas* (the ways), and various teachings and searches within Islam. The teachings of Hoca (Hwaja) Ahmed Yasawi in his Diwan became the pioneer of various Sufi communities in Turkistan such as Kalenderi, Haydari groups as well as the prepared the way for Hacı Bektash, Mevlana Celaleddin-i Rumi and Yunus Emre, the founders of Anatolian Sufi tradition. The Sufi thought also persisted in Akhiyat-ı Fityan (the *Futuwwa* organizations), the guilds that provided solidarity, cohesion and common goals to their members. Turkish Sufism not only influenced the Anatolian *tasavvuf* thought through a chain of Sufi communities, but also created a specific Turkish "national" literature and expanded Islamic mysticism in Anatolia.

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